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Criticizing the Critical Male Gaze in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*

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Much attention has been paid to the sexual dynamics of the male-female gaze in Charlotte Brontë's novels, as in Jill L. Matus's examination of *Villette*. However, two remarkably similar scenes in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* explore the critical element of the male gaze, specifically as an arbiter of female identity. In Chapter 16 of *Jane Eyre* and "The Cleopatra" in *Villette*, Brontë's female protagonists are themselves observers of women; Jane and Lucy each examine a portrait of an exotic woman and another of a plain woman (or women, as in *Villette*). The male gaze arises as a dominant element of both scenes: Jane willingly internalizes the male gaze, while Lucy has a visceral reaction against men's judgements. Although Lucy's interactions with men in the Villette art gallery can be viewed as a more sophisticated challenge to the male gaze, Brontë characterizes Lucy as a critical agent who simultaneously challenges and is restricted by this force.

In these two scenes Jane and Lucy each examine paintings of exotic women. Jane paints one of the imagined Blanche Ingram to punish herself for fantasizing that Rochester feels affection for her. The portrait of Blanche is based loosely on Mrs. Fairfax's description, although it is primarily drawn from Jane's imagination. Jane chooses to "delineate carefully the loveliest face [she could]…imagine" (237). Blanche is the epitome of exotic beauty, with "raven ringlets," an "oriental eye," (237) "august yet harmonious lineaments…[and a] Grecian neck and bust" (238). This portrait of Blanche anticipates the Cleopatra that Lucy Snowe finds in the Villette art gallery. While Blanche is a beauty with oriental qualities, Cleopatra is the consummate oriental queen. Like Blanche's startling beauty, Cleopatra's femininity is larger than life. She has a "wealth of muscle" and an "affluence of flesh" (275). Cleopatra is draped in an "abundance of material" (275) and a "mass of curtain upholstery" falls to the floor. Like Blanche, Cleopatra is surrounded by the accoutrements of wealth - "vases and goblets" and what Lucy dismissively calls "a perfect rubbish of flowers" (275).

In contrast to these exotic women, Jane and Lucy also examine paintings of plain women. Jane's self-portrait is painted in an uncompromisingly realistic manner. She tells herself: "place the glass before you, and draw in chalk your own picture, faithfully; without softening one defect: omit no harsh line, smooth away no displeasing irregularity" (237). She then assigns this the qualitative title "Portrait of a Governess, disconnected, poor, and plain" (237). Jane paints this portrait to instruct herself about what she believes to be her true nature and to lead herself away from "folly"(237). Similarly, the paintings called *La vie d'une femme* are used for Lucy's instruction; M. Paul directs her to them as an appropriate subject for a "*desmoiselle*" to observe (278). Both Jane and Lucy's paintings play on the idea of feminine convention, but while Jane's painting is an attempted packaging of a self into a conventional model, that of the lowly governess, *La vie d'une femme* exaggerates and multiplies feminine conventions. The title of this set of four paintings, each depicting a woman at a different stage in life, suggests a realistic portrayal of the life of a woman. In the context of their paintings, each subject is looking in the "right" places: the young girl keeps her "eyes cast down" in a gesture of religious humility (277) and the bride looks towards heaven. The gazes within these paintings are meant to direct Lucy's gaze appropriately, yet Lucy still judges them as "grim and gray" (278). It is this drab attempted realism of Jane's self-portrait and *La vie d'une femme* that contrasts with the lush exoticism of Blanche Ingram and Cleopatra.

Before they describe these paintings, both Jane and Lucy experience a peculiar "splitting" of their selves into critical and indulgent faculties. For Jane, this splitting comes about in response to her fantasies about Rochester, and is between "Memory" (236) and "Reason" (237). Memory records all of Rochester's pleasant interactions with Jane and cherishes "hopes, wishes, [and] sentiments" regarding his partiality for her (236). Reason attempts to bring these daydreams "into the safe fold of common sense" (236). After characterizing these two inner personae, Jane describes how Reason tells Memory to "Open…[your eyes] and look on your own accursed senselessness" (237). After this extended rebuke, Jane punishes herself by painting the portraits and sides with Reason by "forc[ing]…her feelings to submit" and congratulates herself on her "wholesome

discipline" (238).

Lucy also finds herself split between a critical self and an indulgent self, characters that she calls "Will and Power" (274). This split is a result of the aesthetic problem she faces in the Villette art gallery: should she look at what is conventionally edifying or at what she enjoys? Lucy explains how "The former faculty [Will] exacted approbation of that which it was considered orthodox to admire; the latter [Power] groaned forth its utter inability to pay the tax; it was then self-sneered at, spurred up, goaded on to refine its taste and whet its zest" (274). Unlike Jane, who chooses self-discipline, Lucy chooses to submit to her base inclinations. She tires of these battles within herself and decides to "dispense with that great labour" (274). She then sinks "supine into a luxury of calm before ninety-nine out of a hundred of the exhibited frames" (274). Jane's application and adherence to her interior critical dialogue contrasts with Lucy's resignation to her inclinations. Their contrasting responses of obedience and rebellion anticipate their responses to the critical male gaze.

The presence of the male gaze is an important element of both scenes; it is implicit in *Jane Eyre*, but more explicitly problematic in *Villette*. Jane is alone with her paintings, but she paints these portraits in order to see through Rochester's eyes and judge the two possible love interests as she believes he would. Her awareness of Rochester's criticism has no doubt arisen from his earlier judgements, especially in Chapter 13 where he demands to see her portfolio and "[h]e deliberately scrutinized each sketch and painting" (195). Jane hopes to get behind this scrutinizing gaze to see what Rochester sees. She attempts to do this by giving her paintings titles that reflect her understanding of Rochester's relations to her and Blanche. According to Jane, Rochester considers Blanche "an accomplished lady of rank" (238) but he views Jane as only "a Governess, disconnected, poor, and plain" (237). Jane hopes to summon Rochester's critical faculty whenever she needs reminding of this harsh reality: "[w]henever, in future, you should chance to fancy Mr. Rochester thinks well of you, take out these two pictures and compare them: say, 'Mr. Rochester might probably win that noble lady's love… is it likely he would waste a serious thought on this indigent and insignificant plebeian?'" (238). Here Jane's voice of Reason overlaps with her imagined voice of Rochester, suggesting that the interior critical dialogue she experiences is in fact gendered. Although Rochester is not present in this particular portrait-painting scene, his critical gaze is implicitly present in Jane's analysis of the portraits.

Whereas the masculine presence in Chapter 16 of *Jane Eyre* is only imagined, men's judgements dominate in "The Cleopatra." Lucy closely scrutinizes three men and their reactions to *Cleopatra*: M. Paul, Colonel de Hamal and Graham Bretton. She is very interested in how they perceive Cleopatra. M. Paul says she is a "superb woman...Junoesque, but a person I would not want as a wife, daughter or sister" (608). Lucy concludes from Hamal's body language that he "was exceedingly taken with this dusk and portly Venus of the Nile" (281). Graham provides the most dismissive description: "Pooh!...My mother is a better-looking woman" (282).

Since she is surrounded by these men and their judgements of Cleopatra, Lucy is in a position to be a critic of the male gaze. She is often angered by men's criticism, despite the fact that she enjoys "keeping cool" when interacting with them in the gallery (277). Matus draws attention to the later chapter "Vashti," where Lucy expresses a deep resentment of masculine constructions of feminine identity. In this chapter, Lucy invokes Peter Paul Rubens as the hateful representative of those who paint "fat women" (340). Matus writes that Lucy's "quarrel with such painters is that they have the power to represent women and to influence perceptions of beauty and desirability" (361). Lucy also seems to resent the power men have in the Villette gallery to form their own judgements about women's beauty and desirability.

The question is now to what extent Lucy can challenge this male gaze. Since the majority of men's assessments of women in "The Cleopatra" are witnessed through their gazes, perhaps Lucy could battle that critical gaze with her own. Beth Newman discusses the potential of the returned female gaze: "when a woman looks back she asserts her 'existence' as a subject, her place outside the position of object to which the male gaze relegates her" (1032). The returned female gaze "can register a protest against the gender conventions it mimics" (1033). But in "The Cleopatra" the men are really gazing at the represented women in the paintings, who cannot look back. As Matus points out, even though Lucy is the one woman who can look back, her gaze is entirely outside of the conventional male-female gaze relationship: "she is not really the woman who refuses the position of object of the gaze thereby threatening the dominance of the male viewer. Since no one looks much at Lucy…she can hardly be said to offer a disruptive, returning look" (345). Instead, Matus describes Lucy as "merely someone who looks on as opposed to joining in. Hers is the gaze of the outsider" (346). The dynamics of the gaze are further complicated by the fact that the paintings in the gallery mediate and diffuse the gaze; they are places of projection for the gazes of the men and women.

However, Lucy is successful in expressing her criticism to one male: M. Paul. Lucy resents his judgement of her and his insistence that she look at a particular subject that he has deemed appropriate. Lucy thus critiques M. Paul's domineering criticism. She explains that "[h]is passions were strong, his aversions and attachments alike vivid" (279) and she calls him a "despotic little man" (278). When he directs her towards *La vie d'une femme* while he observes Cleopatra, Lucy expresses her resentment, arguing that the paintings are "too hideous" (280), and that she does not "at all see why…[she] should not look at [Cleopatra]" (277). Finally, M. Paul leaves her, and Lucy is left to look

at whomever and whatever she likes in the gallery. She chooses to watch Hamal, and notices his "womanish feet and hands" and "how engagingly he tittered" (281). She then sarcastically exclaims "Oh the man of sense! Oh, the refined gentleman of superior taste and tact!" (281). Here it appears as if Lucy has used her critical skills well: she has ostensibly defeated M. Paul, and she is inverting the critical male gaze by applying her critical eye to the feminine Hamal.

Yet Lucy cannot be lauded as a heroine who has subverted and taken control of the dynamics of the gaze. Although she challenges M. Paul, she willingly submits to Graham Bretton's judgements. Lucy comments that "I always liked dearly to hear what...[Graham] had to say…he always spoke his thought and that was sure to be fresh: very often it was also just and pithy" (282). Lucy humbles herself to these assessments, describing her own as "obscure and stammering" (282). Here Brontë allows Lucy to be an inconsistent critic who sometimes concedes to men's judgements. Despite this complication, Lucy can still be viewed as a more effective critic of the male gaze in contrast to Jane's willing compliance. Brontë has shown the potential and limitations of a woman's critical response through Lucy. Ulrike Walker describes Lucy as an "elusive female consciousness that simultaneously inhabits and interrogates the imprisoning structures of a masculine cognitive order" (378). The Villette art gallery provides a space for this sort of gaze experiment, where Lucy both challenges and complies with the dominating masculine order that is manifested through the critical male gaze.

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